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ABSTRACT

A discussion on the nature of language argues the following: (1) the concept of a closed and finite rule system is inadequate for the description of natural languages; (2) as a consequence, the writing of variable rules to modify such rule systems so as to accommodate the properties of natural language is inappropriate; (3) the concept of such rule systems belongs instead to a world of stereotypes about language, which are usually politically or ideologically motivated and which must be constantly re-examined, or to written language, which is different in nature and not an alternative representation of spoken language; and (4) while taking note of such stereotypes and their effect on natural language, sociolinguists, as well as all other linguists should be concerned with the description of the systems inherent in the linguistic behavior of networks of individuals, working toward models of adequate explanatory adequacy. Examples are drawn from French, Bahasa Malaysia, Italian, Greek, Swahili, Tok Pisin, and Caribbean Creole. A four-page bibliography is included. (MSE)

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# WHAT IS A LANGUAGE?

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1. My argument will be

   (i) that the concept of a closed and finite rule-system is inadequate for the description of natural languages;

   (ii) that, as a consequence, the writing of variable rules to modify such rule-systems so as to accommodate the properties of natural language is inappropriate;

   (iii) that the concept of such rule-systems belongs instead to a world of stereotypes about language which are usually politically or ideologically motivated, and which must constantly be re-examined. It belongs also to written language, which is an animal of a different nature in important respects from spoken language and not an alternative representation of the same animal;

   (iv) that sociolinguists - and, I believe, all linguists - should while taking note of such sterectypes and the effects they have upon natural language, be concerned with the description of la langue - that is, of the systems inherent in the linguistic behaviour of networks of individuals, and with working towards models of adequate explanatory adequacy for this purpose.

2. In pursuing and illustrating the argument I am going to draw upon the reports and discussions of the 1986 York Workshop of the International Group for the Study of Language Standardization and the Vernacularization of Literacy. We were concerned at that meeting to discuss a number of case-histories of standard languages, and what relationship the stereotype of a discrete finite rule-system bore in each case to the realities of perceived linguistic behaviour. The cases we discussed in addition to Middle and Modern English were those of French, Italian, German, Greek, Chinese, Sango, Swahili, Bislama, Caribbean Creoles and Caribbean English, Nigerian English and Tok Pisin. Obviously it is not necessary to draw upon all of these, but the record of the discussions at the Workshop are full of fascinating observations and insights.

3. In our 1985 book, Acts of Identity, Andrée Tabouret-Keller and I gave on p.202 a diagram which attempts to set out a relationship between diffusion and focussing in linguistic behaviour and in theories about language.

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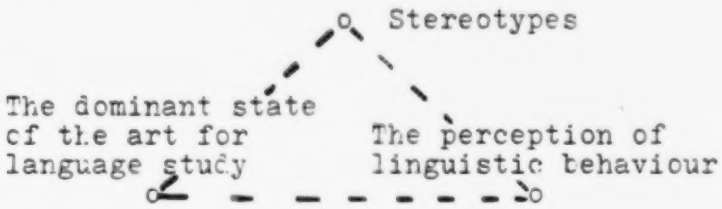
| ← diffuse | | focussed → |
|---|---|---|
| 'Instant pidgin' trading on analogy and metaphor; context-bound | Natural languages in Sense 4, including Creoles | Unchanging and eternal 'language' capable of expressing 'truth' |
| Descriptions of behaviour, highly data-oriented, context-related | More idealized and abstract descriptions, more context-free | Wholly abstract 'grammar' |

Figure 2. Focussing in linguistic behaviour related to focussing in linguistic description

I want to suggest now that we must always take account, in evaluating linguistic descriptions as to their explanatory adequacy, of factors which can be represented diagrammatically under three heads; they form vector triangles of the forces always operating upon the commentator on 'language', either linguist or layman:




I am using 'stereotypes' in the sense of those stock percepts, often rather shallowly based, which we acquire through acculturation and which, according to Adam Schaff (1984) function for humans rather as reflexes do for other organisms - that is, provide us with an automatic response to stimuli, except that they are - subconsciously - learned and not innate. By 'the dominant state of the art for language study' I am subsuming what my younger colleagues would regard as linguistic theory under a more general heading which would include, for example, philology; also, the comparative and historical linguistics of the 19th century which pursued the search for an Ursprache which had been an object of language study for many centuries previously; also, the sense in which 'learning grammar' is used among many schoolteachers as opposed to the sense in which it would be used by linguists; also, Schuchardt's ideas about language contact, language formation and language change as opposed to those of the Neo-grammarians; also, Chinese ideas about what constitutes the study of Chinese, Islamic ideas about what constitutes the study of Arabic; also, notions about the simplicity of some languages as compared with the complexity of others, and about the mother tongue - both of these being metaphors whose history Andrée Tabouret-Keller (see bibliography) has studied; also, notions about the primacy of speech, or the primacy of writing, or about the relationship of the spoken to the written language and vice-versa. These scholarly notions all clearly interact with our stereotypes.

And the perception of linguistic behaviour is obviously affected by, and in turn feeds back into, the other two corners. Most importantly, for my present argument, the perception of utterances as being either deviant or non-deviant, grammatical or ungrammatical, and so on is powerfully influenced by what has been learned under the influence of the other two corners.

4. Let me then give a few illustrations, mostly from our workshop material, under my third opening heading: that the concept of closed and finite rule-systems belongs to a world of stereotypes about language which are usually politically or ideologically motivated, and that these stereotypes must be carefully distinguished from the concept of la langue as Saussure defined it.

First let me say that members of our group have both practical and theoretical concerns - indeed the two are reciprocal. Most of us are concerned in one way or another with teacher training. By that I do not mean necessarily with the training of language teachers, but more generally with the foundations which can be laid for effective teaching across the curriculum by an understanding of how language works for the individual and for society.

We are therefore necessarily concerned with the status that concepts such as, for example, Standard English vis-a-vis dialects, or English vis-a-vis Welsh, or correct vis-a-vis incorrect English, or bilingualism, or language deficiency, have in the minds of the layman, the teacher, the politician or cultural leader, and the linguist. At a more theoretical level we are concerned with the status of the abstractions which grammars and dictionaries purport to describe. We compared case-histories to see what general processes emerged for such percepts as Language X and Language Y.

5. Let me first compare two cases, one at the highly-focussed end of our spectrum and the other very diffuse. The political ideology within the stereotype is very similar:

(i) that it is essential to impose national unity through the sole recognition of a homogeneous national language

(ii) that the precise form of that language - the rule-system, its grammar, vocabulary, and orthography - can be legislated for

(iii) that its homogeneous use can be achieved through the education system.

Such languages are written artefacts, objects of study in schools and of public examination as to their rules. As we shall see, in neither case are they the same as la langue.

6. The case of French If one sets on one side systems based on a small closed body of literature such as Ciceronian Latin or Koranic Arabic, French seems to be among the most clearly reified, totemized and institutionalized of languages. I am indebted to Andrée Tabouret-Keller, John Green, Aidan Coveney, Marie-Anne Hintze and Jean-Michel Charpentier for my information. It was Jean-Michel who said that the stereotype of a standard unifying French language performed the same function for France as the monarchy for Britain. It was decreed as the symbol of national unity in 1539, and again after the Revolution. By the end of the 17th century the written language of the intellectuals among the bourgeoisie of the Île de France, which was seen as having reached a stage of near perfection, was held up as a model for speech. It has been the model ever since.

Nobody actually speaks 'correct French'. The directives about what is to be taught in schools, and in grammars, come from unknown bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education, and when a new Minister of Education wants to make his mark he licenses some grammatical change. Anybody who writes a grammar of French, if they wish it to be adopted, must use official terminology and describe what is officially correct. Each grammarian copies his predecessors. School teachers have strict instructions about what it is they are to teach.

Aidan Coveney, who has collected material illustrating usage and attitudes in Picardy, reported how a trainee primary school teacher claimed she would correct her children's French - the example she chose was the subjunctive of an irregular verb. Coveney added: 'I strongly suspect that teachers leave uncorrected many other non-standard grammatical features which are well-established in the speech of even well-educated adults'.

There are thus at least two possible ways of interpreting the phrase 'the French language'. The first is the official way: a rule-system for a highly focussed approved written language, from which people deviate to the extent that they are not properly educated. This is superimposed upon a scene in which on formal occasions the highly-educated try to adopt this usage in their speech, particularly if they are the bourgeoisie of the 16eme arrondissement of Paris or aspire to that status, while recognizing that less well-educated or provincial people may speak a regional dialect or language. The other way of interpreting the phrase is to accept that it refers to a social stereotype which has been felt to be essential to national unity. That unity has been under threat more frequently and more recently than we in Britain remember: Napoleon might well have become an officer in the British rather than the French army when he was young, because of the Corsican separatist loyalties of his family, and Alsace has changed from being French to being German to being French to being German to being French all between 1870 and 1945. But the stereotype, and its rule-system, is a far cry from being isomorphous with la langue, the language of the French.

7. The case of Bahasa Malaysia Malaysia has many political similarities to France. There is of course possibly even more of an ethnic and religious mix, although when we think of the French we tend to forget not only Alsatians, Catalans, Basques and Bretons but Algerians, Turks, Poles, Guadeloupeans, Martiniquans, South Sea Islanders, Armenians, Italians, Corsicans and Gypsies. Malaysia has its two large ethnic minorities, Tamils and Chinese, alongside the Malays; but it has in addition the indigenous Negritos of the peninsula and the indigenous peoples of Borneo in Sabah and Sarawak - the Dayaks, Kadazan, Murut, Iban and so on. Even the Islamic Malays of West Malaysia vary a good deal culturally and linguistically from Johore in the south to Perlis which juts into Thailand in the north; and there are Babas and Sikhs and Sinhalese and Eurasians all trying not to be wholly submerged. The Malays are only just in the majority, and actually occupy a smaller landmass than the peoples of Sabah and Sarawak; they feel their hegemony permanently threatened, and had two political weapons written into the constitution at independence to underpin it: the Islamic religion and the Malay language. The language, transformed into 'Bahasa Malaysia' or 'the language of Malaysia', is supposed to unify the country through a common education system for which it is today the sole official medium of instruction. Bahasa Malaysia was to be based on the educated written Malay of Johore, and an academy, the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka or Language and Literature Agency, was set up to write the grammars and dictionaries and provide the necessary books.

Although ostensibly the objective is the unification of the state, and of a diverse population, through a common education and a common medium of education, in practice it seems to many non-Malays that the objective is to establish the native speakers of Malay in a privileged position, to redeem their economic situation and to entrench their political power. Everybody has to be taught through the medium of Bahasa Malaysia and to pass examinations in Bahasa Malaysia, and it was thought that the native speakers would thereby have an advantage previously held by the English-educated. This policy has however backfired for two reasons. The first, the important one for my argument here, is that there are no native speakers of Bahasa Malaysia, just as there are no native speakers of official French. Modern spoken educated Malay is very different from the more classical language which the Dewan Bahasa would like to build on; Bahasa Malaysia is, like French, an object of classroom study. As with French, the stereotype persists that there is one national language; and the dominant linguistic theory is that this language must be describable as a closed and finite rule-system. But the rules are still being written, and are not infrequently changed. The morphosyntax of classical Malay in particular is significantly different from that of the modern vernacular. As a result, the native speakers of the vernacular suffer more interference from that vernacular, and in general get poorer marks in their Bahasa Malaysia examinations, than non-native speakers. The second reason is that despite the efforts of the Dewan Bahasa most of the more advanced books are still in English. The pro-French

movement in 16th century France was to a great extent also an anti-Latin, anti-Papal movement, but it was able to make use of an already existing body of French literature and was developing in a technologically leisurely atmosphere. The pro-Malay movement was at one time an anti-English movement and is certainly pro-Islamic, but Bahasa Malaysia has to be developed in a period when at the same time Malaysia desperately needs rapid technological advance and thus at a period when a new élite is being created of Malays who are sent to England or America or Australia for their education, both at school and university, and when the technical vocabulary has either to be created from internal resources or borrowed wholesale from English. If the terms are borrowed in their written form in an orthography which retains international technical visual recognition the problem arises how to pronounce them; if they are borrowed in their spoken form and then written according to the orthographic rules of Malay then they lose that international shape. In either case, quite acute problems arise of derivational morphology, and different people resolve these in different ways.

Now of course many of these problems have been shared by English over the centuries, and I argued at a seminar in Penang in 1983 - in a paper since published in The South-East Asian Journal of Social Science (1984) - that whatever degree of focussing academic written English had achieved today was the product of five or six hundred years of writing; that perhaps the Malaysians really did not need to worry if there was widespread variation in the spoken form of the national language and if that variation was reflected in writing. The reply came that the country was in too much of a hurry to take such a relaxed attitude; but the reasons for that hurry, I believe, are puristic and ideological and political rather than educational. The purists argue that the language is being bastardized; the politicians and the ideologues want one uniform Malay characteristic to be stamped upon the national culture. The concept of an invariable rule-system at the core of the educational system is certainly the dominant linguistic theory. It is a quite unnecessary influence on the political stereotypes about language but one cannot convince the ideologues of that. (The latest edict from Malaysia is that everybody must pronounce the language as it is spelt - i.e. 'geologi' must be pronounced ['ge·ɒ|ɒ'gi] and not like English 'geology.)

## 8. Some other cases briefly mentioned

### Italian

I have no time to deal in detail with all the other fascinating discussions at our workshop, but will mention some of them very briefly since each reflects a different position in my triangle, the stereotypes and the perception of linguistic behaviour being influenced by somewhat different dominant ideological attitudes entrenched in the study of language. Adrian Battye described Italian as a standard language in search of speakers, and Elisabetta Zuanelli told us how the political unity of Italy

took hold in 1861 of Dante's earlier vision of an illustrious Italian for literature which could rival Latin. This, proclaimed as the national language in 1861, was the written language of the 2.5% of the population who made up the ruling class - these people spoke not Italian but French or Spanish or one of the urban dialects. Today a high proportion of Italians speak dialects referred to by such terms as 'Gallo-Italic', 'Veneto', 'Friulian', 'Tuscan', 'median', 'intermediate', 'southern' and 'Sardinian'. (It is worth while recalling Dante's opinion that while there were one thousand dialects in Italy the Sardinians had no language at all but just spoke very bad Latin.)

Confluent processes are taking place today - the Italianization of dialects and the dialectization of Italian. There is variation in Italy along at least four sets of parameters :

(i) functional-stylistic

(ii) diasystemic

(iii) geographical/demographic

(iv) social

Elisabetta Zuanelli concluded that the outcome of present-day sociolinguistic processes in Italy is neither foreseeable nor generalizable. One must study all the complex social processes, including teachers' attitudes towards the highly-fluctuating usage by students in their spoken and written Italian, and the strength or weakness of the focussing influence of the school system. These facts have however not prevented Andrew Radford (1978), for example, from publishing a relational grammar of Italian as if it were a unitary system, without stating anywhere in the book the source of his information - this was I believe the usage of his PhD supervisor.

Thus in Italy the status of a linguistic description of Italian in terms of a linguistic theory idealising a closed and finite rule-system, and the prescription of Italian as a homogeneous national medium of education, is at odds both with the cultural stereotypes of different cultural centres - Venice, Florence, Rome and so on - and with the perceived behaviour of the people.

## 9. Greek

The case of Greece is equally fascinating but with quite different parameters of variation; Janet Warwick and Penelope Gardner-Chloros presented us with a view of a highly-politicised battleground between the proponents of the classically-oriented stereotype of Katharevoussa and the vernacular-oriented stereotype of the demotic Greek. All Greeks are agreed that they speak Greek, and are highly-motivated to understand one another and also to claim links with their glorious literary heritage,

continuity in their national language; yet in Australia Greek-speaking immigrant Serbs and Croats refuse to understand each other, and within Greece itself right-wing and left-wing cannot agree on the rules of written Greek, so that both understanding somebody else and writing a grammar are political and ideological acts. The politics of some newspapers can with some certainty be detected from the particular mix they use between Katharevoussa and Demotic. The national language is now officially Demotic; under a previous right-wing government it was Katharevoussa.

10. Swahili

When we discussed Swahili we found that it had many things in common with the case of Italian. Ki-Swahili was the term applied to the way the coastal peoples of East Africa who traded with the Arabs behaved linguistically in the coastal ports, which resembled in some ways the Italian city-states. It is today to be seen, by anybody standing outside my triangle and observing all the factors at work, as a conglomerate term. There is, for example, the Ki-Swahili of the Old Town, Mombasa, as described by Joan Russell (1981) focussed by the close daily interaction of a Muslim community and by the common practice of both religious and secular poetry over the centuries; there is the Ki-Swahili which was originally described by such missionaries as Bishop Steere in the 19th century from the information he gleaned from the wide variety of informants who passed through his mission in Zanzibar; the Ki-Swahili used as an administrative language by the Germans and British, and gradually standardized first under the influence of an inter-territorial East African committee and then since independence by the Institute of Swahili Research in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania having made it the national language and the medium of education. There is the Ki-Swahili which has been carried into the interior of Africa by trade and missions over an immense area as far as the Congo where it is spoken as a lingua franca, and, in some communities, for example in Zaire, as a first language. There is today, Hermas Mwansoko told us, no single model of 'correct Swahili'; but there is in Tanzania a powerful political and economic incentive to unite the country through the common use of a language sufficiently similar to all the indigenous Bantu languages to make it acceptable . Nevertheless, the tasks of the Institute in Dar es Salaam remain formidable, and many linguistic processes in the community at large continue to develop along lines with which it is very difficult for the grammarian or the lexicographer to come to terms. The dominant concept of a single invariable standard language, a rule-system which has yet to be created under the name of Ki-Swahili, is a political one.

11. I must largely leave aside the cases of German and Chinese, although I would refer to the discussion of them in our Abstracts and also, in the case of Chinese, to the introductory pages of Jerry Norman's recently published volume, Chinese (1988). Certainly, as the discussion between Paul Livesey, Luke Kang-

Kwong and our graduate students from various parts of China at the Workshop showed, a whole series of questions arise around the tension between a strong sense in China of continuity of national identity through the written language on the one hand and attempts at language reform, the use of putonghua as a universal medium of instruction and the introduction of pinyin and simplified characters on the other. I cannot resist quoting one short paragraph from Norman (p.3) on the difference between Chinese and foreign perceptions of 'Chinese' :

> The notion of a single Chinese language existing in a great number of forms, both written and spoken, has important implications for Chinese linguistics. For one thing, it is difficult to draw sharp boundaries between the different varieties of the language: the colloquial is permeated with elements taken from the literary language, and many texts written in the literary language betray the influence of the contemporary vernaculars. The current standard language is an amalgam of the popular Peking dialect, loans from the literary language, and even features of other present-day dialects. The Chinese are of course aware of the differences between the modern vernacular-based standard and the older literary language; but they probably do not think of them as two utterly different languages, as the typical foreign observer is prone to do.

12. I must finish these examples from different positions within my triangle with a situation which at first sight is at the other extreme from Chinese but on closer inspection proves to have a great deal in common with it: I refer to the post-independence attitudes towards language in various Pidgin and Creole-speaking communities.

13. Tok Pisin

We heard a good deal about Tok Pisin, in respect of which Peter Mühlhäusler made the comment that 'the very label "language" is a misleading thing. We are led astray by operating in terms of culture-specific metaphors'. Emanuel Odumuh followed up this comment by saying that he had for years been trying in Nigeria to draw boundaries around 'broken English' as opposed to 'Pidgin' and 'non-standard' and 'Standard Nigerian English', and that from a theoretical point of view and for simplification to look at it in terms of what Lawrence Carrington had suggested as 'a multidimensional pyramidal structure' was helpful in some ways but for him as a teacher raised more problems than it solved. Mühlhäusler's conclusion on Papua-New Guinea was one of the most pointed for my purposes now:

> (p.106) Planning has been dominated by Western ideas of efficiency. At its centre stands the perceived need for an invariable linguistic code. Such planning

is not based on observations of how New Guineans have managed to communicate successfully in linguistically very heterogeneous contexts. A principal conclusion of my paper is that a systematic study of indigenous metalinguistic systems together with observations of the factors that determine successful communication in societies such as those of Melanesia is an essential pre-condition for overcoming Western prejudices about the nature of language and language planning.

14. The Caribbean

A very similar point has been made recently by Hubert Devonish in relation to the indigenization of language studies and Creole as the medium of education in the Caribbean - what are the grammatical categories which make sense at a subconscious as well as at a conscious level to people who speak a creole vernacular? At present all study of language is in terms of Indo-European categories and concepts; and yet, for example, in Creoles all words are - as they are in Chinese - multi-functional, and topic - comment structures are frequently more salient than subject-predicate structures. What is absolutely certain is that a closed and finite rule-system representing a standard language which then has to be modified with further rules to take account of deviance is wholly inappropriate to the definition and description of Creole vernacular usage and to the production of materials, grammars and dictionaries for language study.

In one of the first papers I published on my proposed Linguistic Survey of the British Caribbean in 1951 I wrote that there appeared to be a whole spectrum of use ranging from Standard British English at one end to the broad rural vernaculars at the other; that the Standard end had already been fairly thoroughly described, and that the best I could do was to try to describe the broad vernacular end of the spectrum and give some indication of how people's usage fluctuated between these two ends. This view fitted in with the stereotypes of most educated people, including teachers and educationists, in Jamaica itself - there was correct English and there was bad or broken talk or patwa. But by the time I had been closely involved with the community in a variety of ways for a few years I realised this was a false model. There was more than one broad vernacular; what was going on in most school classrooms was certainly not going on in Standard British English except within the covers of books, most of which came from England; there were many people who claimed a command of each end of the spectrum who in fact commanded neither; Standard British English vs. Patwa was a highly politicised debate in which the teachers had a vested interest but little linguistic understanding. But by the time I realised this and understood what I must try to put in place of this model it was too late. William Stewart in about 1964 invented the terms basilect and acrolect to describe the two ends of my spectrum, and

David DeCamp, who had come to work with me in Jamaica, had seized upon the idea of a polylectal continuum. Derek Bickerton then elaborated this into something rather like an escalator to preserve the concept of Chomskyan rule-systems while arranging a series of them, each distinguished from the next by a single rule-change, to carry the homogeneous broad vernacular speakers inexorably towards the homogeneous standard. The American bandwagon rolled along these lines; 'the post-creole continuum' had become a stereotype among creolists.

15. Conclusion

Today Caribbean teachers and examiners are faced with a very difficult problem in establishing guidelines for the Caribbean Examinations Council as to what is acceptable educated usage; the universities and the teacher training colleges are struggling with the problem of what guidance to give to teachers and lecturers and students. Teachers in Vanuatu and in the Central African Republic and in Nigeria and in India face very similar problems - indeed, we find they are universal.

Nothing I have written here is new. (See, for example, Robert A.Hall Jr. on the centrality of the idiolect.) I have been re-stating and exemplifying facts which were well established long before 1965 when many were hypnotised into thinking of the idealized speaker-listener in a homogeneous community as the object of our study and the closed and finite rule-system generating an infinite set of sentences as the proper outcome.

It is not in the nature of human language for such objects to exist. The motivation which gives rise to such concepts as discrete, closed, finite rule-systems is to be distinguished from that which drives the need for self-expression and identification and communication, although there is clearly cross-over influence between the two. Natural language is inherently and necessarily a polysystemic and potentially infinite network of relationships with an unlimited capacity for analogical development and evolutionary changes, of which the development of writing is one. There are many examples of linguistic systems which have only become discrete when different orthographies were devised for them: Hindi and Urdu are the best-known examples, but at our Workshop we discussed many more from Alcuin's orthography for Latin down to the attempts to write Louisiana French, to standardize the writing of Bislama, or to find a common orthography for Caribbean Creoles. To return momentarily to my first diagram, it seems to me that literacy represents a definite step, a section across these interacting processes after which focussing both of linguistic behaviour and of linguistic theory is likely to be greatly accelerated, initially for an élite and subsequently, in some societies, for the mass of the people. Written languages are, as I have said, animals with different properties from spoken languages. Elite written

languages are different from mass written languages.

It is our urgent task as linguists to find ways of describing for teachers the properties of the triangle I have been depicting, and the ways in which the three corners interact with each other. We must find ways of talking about clusters of concomitant circumstances, linguistic and social, within which probability statements replace rules or laws of cause and effect. Such a revolution has already overtaken physics (see, most recently, Stephen Hawking's Brief History of Time); it is high time it overtook linguistics also. I first asked for 'quantum linguistics' in my foreword to Beryl Loftman Bailey's Jamaican Creole Syntax (1966), but so far only a few, creolists, seem to have recognized the need.

(An earlier version of this paper was given at the First Hong Kong Conference on Sociolinguistics in 1988.)

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